
The Delaware: The Little River That Could

The Delaware is the longest un-dammed river east of the Mississippi.

But it's not big as rivers go. The Nile, the Amazon, the Yangtze – each stretch for some 4,000 miles. The Delaware River and the bay it flows into are but 330 miles long. Size, however, doesn't speak for their might.



Roughly half of New York City's water comes from Delaware River headwater reservoirs. The Delaware and its tributaries serve up water to Philadelphia and a cluster of other nearby riverbank cities, which collectively comprise the world's largest freshwater port.

In all, over 17 million people, or 6.4 percent of the U.S. population, rely on the river, its feeder streams, and its reservoirs for their water.

The Delaware is a river of diverse demands and moods. Fed by the runoff from four states, it tumbles out of New York State's Catskill Mountains, trips over the rocks at the head of tide at Trenton, then glides towards the Delaware Bay.



Photo by David B. Soete

Giant cargo ships and barges off-load at piers along the river's tidal reach, the products supporting a sprawl of heavy industry and one of the nation's largest oil refining-petrochemical centers.

Upstream, bald eagles hunt for prey along the river's main stem and feeder streams that support a world class trout fishery. Canoeists and tubers seek out riffles and rapids.



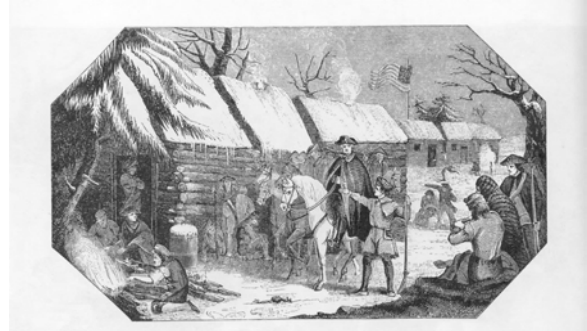
The Delaware's magic and rich history have become the subjects of literary giants.

Walt Whitman discovered poetry in its commerce, describing the steam tugs that plied it as "*saucy little bullpups of the current.*"

Rudyard Kipling wrote about war:

*The snow lies thick on Valley Forge,
The ice on the Delaware,
But the poor dead soldiers of King George
They neither know nor care.*

Thomas Eakins painted sailboats skipping over the Delaware Bay's white-capped waves, and scullers racing on the Schuylkill.



As a result of a remarkable comeback in water quality and a growing appreciation of her many attractions, much of the Delaware River and numerous feeder streams are part of the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System – a designation most often reserved for bucolic trout streams out West. And the tidal reach of the Delaware, along with the Delaware Bay, are part of the National Estuary Program, a project set up in 1988 to protect estuarine systems of national significance.

Because of the improved water quality, the Delaware today supports year-round fish populations, offering excellent trout, bass, walleye, herring, and shad fisheries. A telltale year in the river's comeback was 1981 when Fred Lewis, operator of the only commercial shad fishery on the non-tidal Delaware, netted 6,392 shad.



It was the biggest catch since 1896 when his father was running the business.